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ABSTRACT

This paper presents research in progress from a project which studies inclusive classrooms where culturally relevant literacy instruction is collaboratively planned and implemented. In such programs, teachers, preservice teachers, and professors analyze home and school connections for literacy learning. The core of this co-teaching process is known as the ABC's of Cultural Understanding and Communication. The process is based on the premise that knowing oneself is basic to the understanding of others. The purpose of this year-long project is the following: to strengthen connections between home, classroom, and community through the study of cultural differences and successful home/school connection models for literacy development; to strengthen and implement old skills and learn new skills for successful parent/family/teacher conferences in urban settings; co-create and co-teach culturally responsive literacy lessons to improve writing and reading achievement; document exemplary lessons and conferences with videos for teacher preparation; and analyze data from pre- and post-surveys, pre- and post-literacy tests, participant observations, videotapes, and reflection journal entries. (Contains 51 references.) (PM)

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Home/School Communication for Literacy Development

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Home/School Communication for Literacy Development

Introduction

The purpose of this project is to study inclusive classrooms where culturally relevant literacy instruction is collaboratively planned and implemented. Teachers, preservice teachers, and professors will analyze home and school connections for literacy learning and plan and implement culturally relevant instruction. The core of this co-teaching project is the process known as the ABC's of Cultural Understanding and Communication (Schmidt, 1998; 1999; 2000; 2001; Xu, 2000; 2001;Leftwich, 2001; in press, 2002). This paper begins with an explanation of purpose, and is followed by the literature supporting the project. Next, we will outline implementation, the means for evaluating the project, and the progress made thus far.

Explanation of Purpose

The African proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child," has gained new emphasis. As an important institution of the village, schools need to make strong connections with the village and its families. Also, research suggests that effective communication between home and school is critical to the academic development of all children and the creation of successful classrooms and schools (Heath, 1983; Mandel Morrow, 1996; Schmidt, 1999; Edwards, 1999; Thompson, 2002). Therefore, educators must become more aware of children's homes and communities and strengthen communication. Such ideas as culturally relevant pedagogy (Osborne, 1996) joinfostering (Faltis, 1993; Schmidt, 2000), conflict resolution (Katz & Lawyer, 1993), group process (Kormanski, 1999), community collaboration and consultation (Paloma McCaleb, 1994; Kampwirth, 1999), ABC's of Cultural Understanding and

Communication (Schmidt, 1998), and parent stories (Edwards, 1999) have demonstrated the power of teachers, family, and community connections. The implementation of these plans or formulas has generally been successful, but there is little understanding of the person -to -person unstructured conversations between families and educators that develop the relationships necessary to foster home, school, and community connections. There is also little research and understanding of the connections between home and school that increase student reading and writing achievement in urban areas. Therefore, the purpose of this yearlong project is the following:

1. Strengthen connections between home, classroom, and community through the study of cultural differences and successful home/school connection models for literacy development.
2. Strengthen and implement old and learn new skills for successful parent/family/teacher conferences in urban settings
3. Co-create and co-teach culturally responsive literacy lessons to improve reading and writing achievement
4. Document exemplary lessons and conferences with videos for teacher preparation of culturally relevant pedagogy and home/school communication
5. Analyze data from pre and post surveys, pre and post literacy tests, participant observations, videotapes, and reflection journal entries.

Background

Since the fall of 1999, teacher preparation early literacy courses have been taught three days a week at South Side Elementary School. The Part I and Part II literacy

courses are designed to help preservice teachers understand literacy development in an urban elementary inclusive setting. Preservice teachers tutor children one, half hour for three days a week and then attend their college class in the elementary building. During the time with their professor, they focus on the learning and teaching of reading, writing, listening, speaking, and viewing in light of theoretical perspectives and belief systems. In the tutoring situation, preservice teachers focus on their children's special literacy learning needs and culturally relevant teaching. In both settings, preservice teachers document children's literacy behaviors and explore and observe effective methods and materials. Journal entries and reflections are reported and discussed in the classroom with other preservice teachers, professors, South Side teachers and principal. Teachers and preservice teachers meet 2 to 3 times during the semester to discuss the children's progress, behavior management, and materials. Also, preservice teachers often have an opportunity to teach literacy lessons in the elementary classrooms of teachers in the building.

Generally, these courses are successful, but there is a major problem. Preservice teachers frequently do not witness culturally relevant instruction or the development of positive home/school communication for literacy development. Therefore, this home/school communication proposal for culturally relevant literacy development will link preservice teachers with inservice teachers and professors for learning to communicate effectively with families in the urban inclusive setting and for creating culturally relevant literacy lessons. Furthermore, preservice teachers will have opportunities to observe, create, teach, and gather data in these settings.

Research Basis for this Study

Research and practice demonstrate that strong home/school connections not only help students make sense of the school curriculum, but also promote literacy development (Heath, 1983; Reyhner & Gracia, 1989; Au, 1993; Edwards, 1995; 1996; Schmidt, 2000). However, for several reasons, in recent years, home-school connections have become a significant challenge. First, as our school population has become increasingly diverse, both culturally and ethnically, our teaching population has consistently originated from European American, suburban experiences. Typically, educators describe themselves as white and middle class and often add, during discussions about diversity, "I'm an American; I don't have a culture," (MacIntosh, 1990; Ladson-Billings 1994; Florio-Ruane, 1994; Snyder, Hoffman, C. M., & Geddes, 1997; Schmidt, 1999). Second, most present and future teachers have not had sustained relationships with people from different ethnic, cultural, and lower socioeconomic backgrounds, so much of their knowledge about diversity has been influenced by media stereotypes (Tatum, 1997; Pattnaik, 1997). Third, school curriculum, methods, and materials usually reflect only European American or white culture and ignore the backgrounds and experiences of students and families from lower socioeconomic levels and differing ethnic and cultural backgrounds (Sleeter & Grant, 1991; Purcell-Gates, 1993; Nieto, 1996: Walker-Dalhouse & Dalhouse, 2001). Fourth, many teacher education programs do not adequately prepare educators for making strong home-school connections (Gay & Howard, 2000; Wallace, 2000; Lalik & Hinchman, 2001). Consequently, this disconnect has become a national problem whose impact has been linked to poor literacy development and extremely high drop out rates among students

from urban poverty areas (Heath, 1983; Cummins, 1986; Goldenberg, 1987; Trueba, et al., 1990; Au, 1993; Banks, 1994; Author, 1998c; Edwards, Pleasants, Franklin, 1999).

As a teacher educators, we searched for ways to prepare present and future teachers for the diversity in their classrooms. We discovered that the most successful programs are those that incorporate authentic encounters with people from different backgrounds and experiences while learning content related to racism, sexism, and classism (Tatum, 1992;1997; Noordhoff & Kleinfield, 1993; Florio-Ruane, 1994; Cochran-Smith, 1995; Willis & Meacham ,1997). Furthermore, these programs often claim that teacher self-knowledge may be the first consideration when attempting to help teachers understand diverse groups of students (Britzman, 1986; Banks, 1994). Considering all of the above factors, Ruggiano Schmidt, over a five year period of time, designed and developed the model known as ABC's of Cultural Understanding and Communication. It is a process based on the premise that, knowing oneself is basic to the understanding of others. K-12, present and future teachers who experience the process often begin to successfully connect home and school for literacy learning (Schmidt, 1998c; 1999; 2000; 2001; Xu, 2000a; 2000b; Leftwich, 2001). The model's five-step process is supported by previous research and is briefly explained in the following paragraphs.

Autobiography

First, each teacher writes an autobiography that includes key life events related to education, family, religious tradition, recreation, victories, defeats, et al. This helps to build awareness of personal beliefs and attitudes that form the traditions and values of cultural autobiographies (Banks, 1994). Since it is well documented that writing is linked

to knowledge of self within a social context (Emig, 1971; Yinger, 1985), writing one's life story seems to construct connections with universal human tenets and serves to lessen negative notions about different groups of people (Progoff, 1975). The autobiography experience sets the stage for the second step, learning about the lives of culturally different people (Sjoberg & Kuhn, 1989; Banks, 1994).

Biography

After several in depth, audiotaped, unstructured or semi-structured interviews (Spradley, 1979; Bogdan & Biklen, 1994) of a person who is culturally different, each teacher constructs a biography from key events in that person's life. This helps a teachers begin to develop the cultural sensitivity necessary to analyze similarities and differences in the two life stories (Spindler & Spindler, 1987; Author, 1998b, 1998c, 2000).

Cross-Cultural Analysis and Appreciation of Differences

For the third step in the process, each teacher studies the audiobiography and biography and charts a list of similarities and differences. This leads to the fourth step, self-analysis of differences, a key component of the process (Cummins, 1986; Spindler & Spindler, 1987; Paley, 1989; Trueba,et al., 1990; Derman-Sparks, 1992; McCaleb, 1994; Author, in process). The teacher then carefully examines the chart that lists similarities and differences and writes an in depth self-analysis of cultural differences, explaining the reasons for any personal discomforts and/or positive affect. Through this process teachers begin to acquire insights about others and sense their own ethnocentricity (Spindler, 1987).

Home-School Connection Plans for Literacy Development

After experiencing the previous steps in the process, K-12 teachers design

yearlong plans for connecting home and school for children's reading, writing, listening, and speaking development based on numerous modifications of the ABC's Model for their own classrooms and schools. They see ways to develop collaborative relationships with families in an atmosphere of mutual respect, so that students gain the most from their education (Goldenberg, 1987; Faltis, 1993; McCaleb, 1994). They discover that families have a wealth of knowledge to share and can help teachers develop relevant literacy lessons and motivate children's literacy learning (Goldenberg, 1987; Reyhner & Garcia, 1989; Trueba, et al., 1990; Faltis, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1994; McCaleb, 1994; author, 1999; Edwards,et al., 1999).

The ABC's of cultural Understanding and Communication helps teachers learn about family and community values and shows them how to value what community and family know. The results are clear; the boundaries are blurred between home and school in an atmosphere of collaboration and learning.

Implementation

Professors and teachers in the South Side building have developed a positive working relationship over the last three years. The literacy courses taught at South Side provide preservice teachers with many opportunities to meet teachers, students, support staff, and administrators. They tutor South Side children, teach lessons in classrooms, and become involved in after school activities and programs.

South Side Elementary School is located in a high poverty urban setting. Its population is 90% African American and 10% Latino, European American, Native American, and Asian American. The principal is African American and the Faculty and

Staff are 10% African American and 90% European American. 95% of the children receive free or reduced breakfast and lunch.

The preservice program in this small liberal arts college is known throughout the state as a rigorous one that prepares future teachers to be successful in school districts across the Nation. Preservice teachers rush to register for this class since it has earned the reputation as an excellent course to learn about early childhood literacy development. 23 European Americans, 2 Latinos, and one Korean American were enrolled.

Plan

The City School District teachers and college professors meet weekly and bi-weekly to discuss and implement practical applications of home/school communication and create and teach culturally relevant literacy lessons to improve reading and writing achievement. We will reach out for family, community, and school resources to encourage collaborative literacy learning efforts. Our goal is to blur boundaries and empower stakeholders.

Preservice teachers will benefit since they will have numerous opportunities to observe, evaluate and participate in collaborative planning and implementation.

Teachers will receive inservice credit from the district during the first semester. Second semester they will be paid through a grant. Literacy lessons, teachers and preservice teachers journals and family, school, community sessions will be videotaped and used for future in-service and preservice teacher preparation programs.

Schedule of Topics For the School Year

(Teacher Inservice and Preservice Literacy Courses)

* ABC's of Cultural Understanding and Communication- Why know thyself and understand others? Cultural analyses between and among participants
* Why home/school/community connections for literacy development? Study of research
* Know the community: Learning the realities of cultural funds of knowledge
* Community leaders and community power
* How to begin to talk…to share…to listen
* Examining parent conferences, curriculum nights, e-mail, newsletters, phone calls, and home visits
* Meetings on neutral ground
* Family/teacher/student dialogue-Collaboration
* Culturally relevant pedagogy and motivation
* Culturally relevant pedagogy and academic achievement
* Planning relevant pedagogy with families and community-co-teaching
* Implementing lessons-co-teaching
* Assessing lessons-co-teaching

Project Evaluation

This project will be evaluated both quantitatively and qualitatively. Field notes, lessons, journals, and videotapes gathered will allow us to reflect and analyze case studies. Pre and post home/school communication surveys administered to building faculty and staff will help us determine changes in attitudes concerning home/school

communication. Student achievement will be measured using district recommended pre and post tests of literacy development. Student literacy achievement of teachers who are part of the project will be compared to students of teachers who have not participated in the project.

Progress

Preservice teachers and teachers have completed most of the ABC's process. Preservice teachers have taught numerous culturally responsive lessons to the children they have been tutoring throughout the semester. They have come to know a great deal information about the children's families and have actually conferred with parents. Two students had parents observe their literacy lessons in progress.

5 teachers, one teaching assistant, two courses away from teacher certification, the school librarian, school psychologist, and family liaison took part in the inservice training. They met one hour and a half for 10 weeks during the fall semester. They went through the ABC's of Cultural Understanding and Communication, studied multicultural children's literature, observed and discussed videos created by the Southern Poverty Law Center for Teaching Tolerance. All plan to continue their inservice work second semester. Five preservice teachers will co-teach with the five certified teachers. The teaching assistant will co-teach with the teacher she presently works. In a sense, she will be teaching her by modeling lessons. The librarian, school psychologist, and family liaison will be co-teaching, observing, journaling, and/or acting as resources for present and future teachers working on this project.

Survey of Attitudes

A brief survey was administered to participants at the end of the semester in order to gather feedback from participants. Questions focused on participants' perceptions of the content, process, and logistics of the project, as well as the benefits of participation. Participants were also asked to provide suggestions or comments that might be helpful for improving the project. Survey questions were:

1. What struck you most? Please explain.
2. What has been the best activity so far? Why?
3. What would you like to change? How and why?
4. How will your participation benefit your students?
5. What is the best time to meet?
6. Other comments and suggestions?

Qualitative analysis procedures were used to analyze this data. Participants wrote primarily about the ABC model, historical knowledge and theory, interacting with colleagues, and classroom applications. Findings showed an overall positive response, and indicated that participants are both pleased and encouraged by the project.

The two most striking activities were the films and the interviews. Participants noted that the films were extremely powerful and important to see, even though they were difficult to watch. As one participant shared, "It is easier to ignore such negative, harsh circumstances." One respondent asked for a clearer link between this historical and disturbing information and classroom improvement. "How does the history help us to get where we are going?" This question suggests that she is clear about the goal, but uncomfortable with the foundational information, or less certain about how it facilitates

progress toward the goal. In addition to the films, the interview process had a strong impact on participants.

The interviews were difficult for many participants initially, but they were extremely revealing and helped teachers establish a relationship with parents and develop understanding. "I loved the interviewing. I was amazed at how much I learned."

In the survey, participants were also asked to share their favorite activities. One participant stated that she truly enjoyed all of the activities. The most common responses named role-playing and the facial study as the best activities. Overall, participants enjoyed interacting with co-workers and getting to know each other better. Teaching can be a solitary occupation, but getting to know colleagues better improves the quality and quantity of collaboration. Discussing race and differences has improved relations and facilitated collaboration and understanding. "We need to notice diversity more and not just pretend everyone is the same." The effects of these interactions are evident in the responses. "I have really enjoyed getting to know my co-workers better."

When explaining their understanding of the benefits of this project, participants said that they are becoming more aware of diversity and the amount of stereotyping that occurs on a regular basis. Many participants also stated that they are developing a greater understanding of and empathy for students and their families, and becoming "more willing to reach out to my (students') parents." This, in turn, enables them to know their students better and make lessons more relevant.

When asked to share ideas that might improve the project, teachers indicated that they would like to see more specific examples of how others "use culturally relevant materials and activities." Most participants also indicated that they wished we had more

time. A few shared concerns about starting late because of various delays after school, suggesting that if everyone was prompt we could to make the most of the time we have.

These responses indicate that the project is proceeding as planned with possible improvements in two areas: logistics (being more strict regarding punctuality) and process (map out objectives, linking each activity to overall goals and including more modeling of activities). These results are encouraging because they indicate that progress is being made and they show how the project can improve.

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